



Suzan-Lori Parks

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*Every play I write is about love and distance.
And time. And from that we can get things
like history.*

— Suzan-Lori Parks, 1994

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1964
- * African-American playwright, novelist, and screenplay writer
- * First African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama

Biography

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks was born in 1964 in Fort Knox, Kentucky, the daughter of an Army colonel. Her family moved often during her childhood and as a teenager, Parks lived in Germany, where she attended German schools instead of the American schools for children of military personnel. By this time, she had already begun to write short pieces, and she later cited this experience in working in a language other than her native tongue as key to her later facility with language and dialogue.

During college at Mount Holyoke, Parks studied fiction writing with James Baldwin. After hearing Parks read her works aloud, acting out the different characters' parts, Baldwin suggested that she turn her attention to drama. Parks later described her stories for Baldwin's class as having come from her sense of being able to see the characters in the room as she wrote, presenting their stories in dramatic form. She turned to studying other playwrights' work, including Ntozake Shange and Adrienne Kennedy, where she discovered a freedom from many of the constraints of traditional drama. Her own first plays were similarly transgressive in form -- though her first work, *The Sinner's Place*, won honors, the theatre department declined to produce it because of its experimental form.

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Suzan-Lori Parks

Biography continued

This early controversy set the stage for Parks's career. Her plays have managed to make theatre producers uncomfortable because of their racial themes, which are assumed to be uncomfortable for white audiences. At the same time, though, Parks's plays are rarely produced in venues that focus on African-American plays. A 1993 symposium planned for *Theater* magazine was abandoned because not enough African-American critics were willing to participate, citing their objections to Parks's politics. Parks's plays deal with difficult issues of racism and sexism, and she says that they are not for audiences who "only want something simple" (Garrett 26).

After college, Parks studied acting in London and continued writing plays. In 1987, her play *Betting on the Dust Commander* was produced in New York City; in 1989, her second play, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, won an Obie Award for best Off Broadway play of the year. (It was during these early days of playwrighting that Parks began spelling her name with the trademark Z, the result of a misprinted publicity flier that she decided to adopt.)

The America Play (1994) featured a protagonist (the "Foundling Father") who is obsessed with Abraham Lincoln. The African-American character works in a carnival, where in a twist on the old blackface shows, he wears white face paint. In a mock theatre, carnivalgoers can take on the role of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, and shoot at the Foundling Father with a cap gun.

The Lincoln/Booth connection surfaced again in 2001 in *Topdog/Underdog*. Parks's first Broadway play, *Topdog/Underdog* features two brothers, named Lincoln and Booth, who operate a three-card monte act until Lincoln takes a job in an arcade, costumed as Abraham Lincoln. The play focuses on the tension between the naturally gifted Lincoln and his lesser-talented and bitter brother, Booth, culminating in a violent end. Jeffrey Wright originated the role of Lincoln, with Don Cheadle as Booth. When the play moved to Broadway, rapper Mos Def stepped into the role of Booth opposite Wright.

Topdog/Underdog was hailed by critics who saw in Parks's work ties to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Greek tragedy, Biblical symbolism, and traces of hip-hop. Parks, not yet forty years old, became the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, only days after the play opened on Broadway.



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Biography continued

In 2002, she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship (the “genius grant”) from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The highly competitive grants are awarded through a nomination process to those whom the foundation feels have shown exceptional creativity and promise for significant future accomplishments.

In 2003, Parks returned to fiction writing, publishing her first novel, *Getting Mother’s Body*. A twist on Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, the novel follows the quest of a pregnant teenager who sets off with a small group of accomplices for Arizona, where she plans to exhume her mother’s body in order to retrieve the jewels supposedly hidden in the coffin. She is pursued by her mother’s former lover, who vows to keep her promise that the jewels remain with the body.

Parks says that the novel and its characters are grounded in the landscape of West Texas, where she had lived during her father’s army days: “I love the big sky and arid landscape of that place. The characters came out of that landscape and the story came out of those characters. Then there was Faulkner’s novel, which I had read eight years before” (Marshall).

Getting Mother’s Body received mostly favorable reviews, though some critics faulted it for being too much like a play. Reviewers drew comparisons to authors such as Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. In addition to her plays and novel, Parks has also written two screenplays, *Anemone Me* (1990) and *Girl 6* (1996), directed by Spike Lee. She has also written three plays for radio, *Pickling* and *Third Kingdom* (both in 1990) and *Locomotive* (1991). She is currently working on a screenplay adaptation of Toni Morrison’s novel *Paradise*, to be produced by Oprah Winfrey’s film company, as well as a stage musical, *Hoopz*, about the Harlem Globetrotters, for Disney.

Parks has taught or worked as writer-in-residence at numerous institutions, including Yale University and the Pratt Institute for the Arts. She is currently director of the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. Parks lives in Venice Beach, CA, with her husband, Paul Oscher, a blues musician.



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